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Committee on Conferences
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Agenda item 3 (6)

Control and limitation of documentation: compliance with the regulations concerning page limits

Note by the Secretariat

I. Introduction

1. The present note is submitted in accordance with General Assembly resolution 53/208 B, in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit every two years, through the Committee on Conferences, updated information on the number and length of documents. The information contained herein for the years 1998-1999 follows the reporting format of documents A/51/268 and A/AC.172/1998/CRP.4, which analysed the number and length of documents for the years 1995 and 1996-1997, respectively.

II. Developments concerning documentation policy during 1998 and 1999

2. In its resolution A/53/208 B, the General Assembly stressed the need for compliance with the existing page limits for documents, and invited all intergovernmental bodies to consider, where appropriate, the possibility of further reducing the length of their reports from 32 to 20 pages. The Assembly called upon the Secretariat to make more rigorous its procedures for obtaining waivers to the 16-page rule for documents originating in the Secretariat, while maintaining the necessary degree of flexibility, with a view to encouraging author departments to reduce the length of their submissions while maintaining high standards of quality.

3. In the same resolution, the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to continue to improve the quality of the translation of documents into the six official languages in a timely manner.

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4. In December 1999, in its resolution A/54/248 C, the Assembly reiterated its request to the Secretary-General to ensure that documentation is available in accordance with the six-week rule for the distribution of documents simultaneously in the six official languages of the General Assembly.

5. During the period covered by the present note, the format of documentation has been improved in all languages by the introduction of a new, easy-to-read, double-column layout, which has contributed to a reduction in the length of documents.

III. Length of documents

6. In accordance with the method used in previous reports on the length of documents and in order to provide as comprehensive a picture as possible of the degree of compliance with the existing page limits, statistical information has been compiled on the number and length of documents issued in 1998 and 1999 for the General Assembly, the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council. During 1999, in anticipation of the year 2000 (Y-2K) problem, the migration from the non-Y2K compliant old tracking system in conference services to a state-of-the-art electronic document registration information and tracking system was implemented. As a result of the migration, not all the data stored in the old system was available for the preparation of the present note, while the potential of the new system could not yet be fully exploited. Thus, certain adjustments had to be made and, as in earlier reports, the data gathered refer only to documents issued strictly under the symbols of those three principal organs (A/-, S/- and E/-). Documents issued under the symbols of subsidiary bodies of those organs, including their main and sessional committees, are excluded. Meeting records, official records, resolutions, information documents and corrigenda are also excluded.

7. The documents have been categorized as follows:

(a) *Category A*: reports originating in the Secretariat;

(b) *Category B*: major policy documents, such as the proposed programme budget and reports not originating in the Secretariat; this group includes reports of subsidiary organs and of special rapporteurs, reports in which replies from Governments are compiled and other documents whose length, in a strict sense, cannot be controlled by the Secretariat, such as agendas, notes transmitting biographical information of candidates for elections, programmes of work and similar documents;

(c) *Category C*: communications from Member States;

(d) *Category D*: draft resolutions and draft decisions.

8. The information below combines statistics for the years 1998 and 1999 and can be summarized as follows:

Category	Documents		Pages	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
A	1 231	24	14 598	30
B	1 293	26	23 195	48
C	2 062	41	9 691	20
D	451	9	1 175	2
Total	**5 037**	**100**	**48 659**	**100**

As seen under category A, the length of about one fourth of the documents included in the sample is subject to control by the Secretariat. The length of the remaining documents reflects the practices and decisions of intergovernmental bodies and the Member States themselves. Compared to the previous two years, the number of documents increased by more than 7 per cent while the total number of pages decreased by 3 per cent. Consequently, the length of an average document — about 10 pages — is one page less than in previous years. The ratios between the categories are unchanged: categories A and B account for half the total number of documents and three quarters of the total number of pages.

Category A. Reports originating in the Secretariat

9. The breakdown by length of reports originating in the Secretariat is as follows:

Category A

Length	Documents		Pages	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
1-16 pages	951	77	5 856	40
17-20	88	7	1 655	12
21-24	47	4	1 057	7
25-32	63	5	1 755	12
33-50	56	5	2 188	15
51-100	22	2	1 340	9
100+	4	0	747	5
Total	**1 231**	**100**	**14 598**	**100**

Close to 80 per cent of the Secretariat documents continue to comply with the limit of 16 pages; however, because of their length, the remaining documents continue to account for 60 per cent of the workload originating in the Secretariat. Documents with manuscript in excess of the page limit are accepted for processing only if the heads of the author departments concerned provide written justification for the need to exceed the established limit. Conference services, while providing guidance and advice on how to reduce the length of such manuscripts, decides on a case-by-case basis on the granting of waivers to the sixteen-page rule.

Category B. Major policy documents and reports not originating in the Secretariat

10. The breakdown by length of major policy documents and reports not originating in the Secretariat is as follows:

Category B

	Documents		*Pages*	
Length	*Number*	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*
1-16 pages	998	77	4 779	21
17-20	48	4	891	4
21-24	35	3	792	3
25-32	47	4	1 337	6
33-50	75	6	3 055	13
51-100	44	3	2 945	13
100+	46	3	9 396	40
Total	**1 293**	**100**	**23 195**	**100**

This category includes documents of intergovernmental bodies. Notwithstanding the numerous invitations of the General Assembly for subsidiary bodies to reduce the length of their reports from the desired limit of 32 pages to 20 pages, three quarters of the workload in this category involves documents that are longer than 20 pages. The proportion of documents in category B exceeding the desirable limit of 32 pages, however, decreased from 40 to 32 per cent of the total workload included in the sample used in the present note.

Category C. Communications from Member States
Category D. Draft resolutions and decisions

11. Although communications from Member States and draft resolutions and decisions are not subject to length limitations, their breakdown by length is indicated below for information purposes:

Category C

	Documents		*Pages*	
Length	*Number*	*Percentage*	*Number*	*Percentage*
1-16 pages	2 003	97	7 243	75
17-20	18	1	332	4
21-24	6	0	138	1
25-32	14	1	398	4
33-50	12	1	503	5
51-100	4	0	232	2
100+	5	0	845	9
Total	**2 062**	**100**	**9 691**	**100**

Category D

Length	*Documents*	*Pages*
1-16 pages	449	1 126
17-50	2	49
Total	**451**	**1 175**

IV. Conclusions

12. **Although the number and proportion of documents issued in accordance with the established and desirable page limits have increased, compliance with the limitation targets for both intergovernmental and Secretariat documents continues to be only partial. The slight reduction in the overall length of documents demonstrated above is most likely to be a direct result of the new format.**

13. **Documents which are significantly in excess of the page limit, especially when submitted late, create an additional burden for the processing services, can jeopardize timely issuance and may compromise quality. Member States have repeatedly called for the timely issuance of documentation and respect for simultaneous distribution of all language versions, and have raised quality concerns. Bearing all this in mind, efforts to further reduce the length of documents should concentrate on those cases where page limits are applicable or desirable since such documents make up 50 per cent of all documentation and account for close to 80 per cent of their total volume.**